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SUBJECT: TURKEY: PRIVATE BROADCASTERS BEGIN KURDISH LANGUAGE BROADCASTS IN SE

REF: A) 2005 ADANA 163 B) ANKARA 99

¶1. (SBU) Summary: Three private, local stations began Kurdish-language broadcasts in Turkey's southeast on March 23. The landmark broadcasts mark the end of nearly four years of obstructionism by GOT broadcasting authorities. Though strapped with severe restrictions on air time and Turkish-language translation requirements, these broadcasts represent some progress in expanding freedom of expression for Turkey's Kurdish population. It is not yet clear whether the tightly restricted programming will be able to attract an audience. End summary.

¶2. (SBU) On March 23, GUN TV and SOZ TV in Diyarbakir and Medya FM Radio in Sanliurfa made their first legal broadcasts in the Kirmanci dialect of the Kurdish language after a long and hard-fought struggle (reflets) with the High Board of Radio and Television (RTUK) to gain the right for private stations to broadcast in a non-Turkish mother tongue. The television stations will be allowed to broadcast in Kurdish for only 45 minutes per day, four hours per week, while radio stations will be allowed to broadcast for up to one hour per day, five hours per week. The stations must also provide Turkish subtitles, or follow-on Turkish translations. In press reports RTUK officials emphasized that "all these broadcasts should be in line with the rule of law, constitutional principles, fundamental rights and freedoms, national security, fundamental values of the Republic; and should not violate the integrity of the state."

¶3. (SBU) GUN TV's managing director told us that the station's first program, entitled "Cradle of Civilization," aired between 8:15 and 9:00 p.m. on March 23. The program discussed the history and culture of the region around Diyarbakir, and will continue to be aired at the same time on Mondays and Thursdays. GUN TV told us that Diyarbakir Mayor Osman Baydemir, of the pro-Kurdish Democratic Society Party (DTP), as well as other Kurdish political figures, expressed great interest in the broadcasts by visiting the studio to watch the first program. In man-on-the-street interviews following the broadcasts, viewers told CNN Turk and NTV that Kurdish broadcasts were not dividing the country, as some critics had previously warned, and that broader freedoms for Kurds should be allowed.

¶4. (SBU) A representative from SOZ TV told us the station lacked the infrastructure to broadcast extensively in Kurdish, so they were able to air only 10 minutes of Kurdish language news between 8:00 and 8:10 p.m. on March 23. SOZ TV told us that they anticipated making regular broadcasts of music and documentaries in Kurdish in the future.

¶5. (SBU) Sanliurfa-based Medya FM Radio's General Manager told us the station's first Kurdish-language broadcast was a one-hour program consisting of four 15-minute segments of Kurdish-language news, music, documentaries and cultural programming between 6:00 and 7:00 p.m., followed by the same series of programs translated into Turkish between 7:00 and 8:00 p.m. Medya FM told us that after their first Kurdish-language broadcast they received many calls from listeners who provided mostly positive feedback on the broadcasts; some even offered news and programming tips for future broadcasts. Medya FM said that the station also received some threats and curses on the internet from anonymous, ultra-nationalist listeners. The General Manager told us that RTUK had agreed to Medya FM's request to broadcast in Kirmanci, but had denied the station's original requests to also broadcast in the Zaza dialect of Kurdish as well as Arabic.

¶6. (U) The state-run TRT (Turkish Radio-TV) was the first station to broadcast in Kurdish and other minority languages after Parliament in 2002 removed the prohibition on minority-language programming. Since June 2004, TRT has broadcast news and documentary programs in one minority language per weekday for 30-minutes.

Comment

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¶7. (SBU) These Kurdish-language broadcasts represent important yet limited steps forward in expanding freedom of expression for Turkey's Kurdish population. We hope that the severe restrictions on air time and translation requirements do not make these broadcasts too expensive for the these small, local stations. Because of the heavy financial costs of meeting the extensive RTUK regulations, some observers wonder whether Kurdish-language broadcasting could suffer the same fate as the private Kurdish-language courses, which were not economically

viable under the official restrictions and closed in 2005 after less than one year of operation. Many contacts also question whether the restricted programming can compete with Roj TV, which broadcasts in Kurdish 24 hours a day from Copenhagen (see reftel B). We will continue to track this.

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